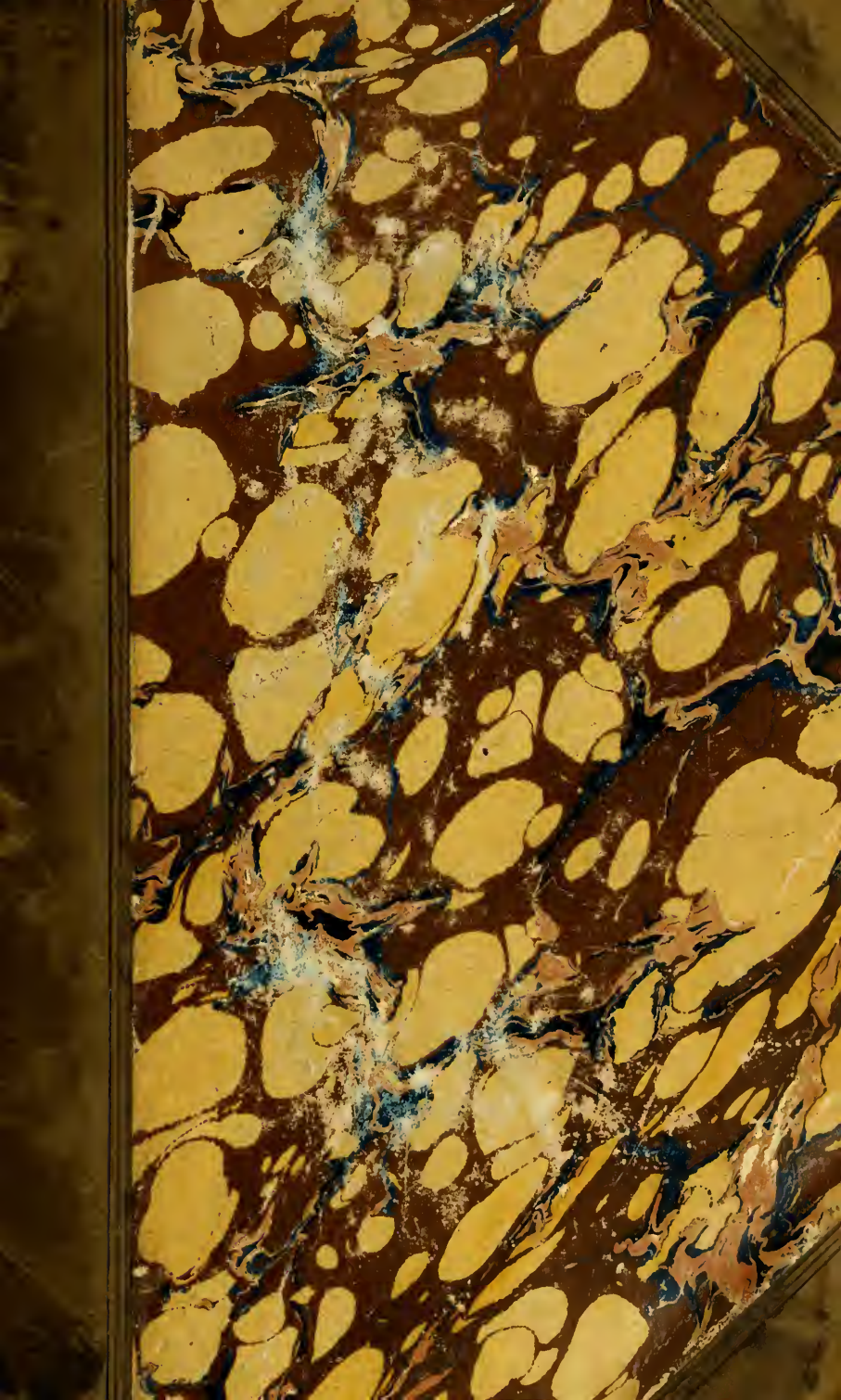

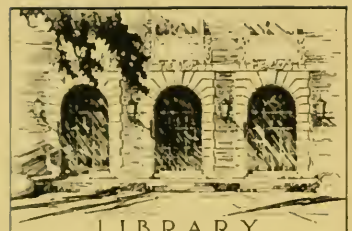

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THE VITALITY OF CHRISTIAN FAITH.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, JULY 5th, 1863,

AT THE

CHAPEL ROYAL, WHITEHALL,

In Aid of the Boy's Home, Euston Road,

BY THE

REV. ARTHUR PENRHYN STANLEY, D.D.,

Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Oxford; Deputy Clerk of the Closet and Chaplain to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

LONDON:

J. PAUL, 1, CHAPTER HOUSE COURT,

North Side of St. Paul's Church-yard.

No. 3,874. z

SERMON.

"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."—John vi. 37.

It is said that when the great Bishop Butler was lying on his death-bed he was observed to be unusually pensive and dejected, and on being asked the cause, he replied, "Though I have endeavoured to avoid sin and please God to the utmost of my power, yet, from the consciousness of perpetual infirmities, I am still afraid to die." A friend who stood by, read to him this text, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." "Ah," said the dying man, "I have read that a thousand times, but I never felt its full force till this moment, and now I die happy." What that eminent theologian and philosopher had failed to see may also have escaped some of us. This is, indeed, a text which, though we have heard it and read it a thousand times, has a virtue in it which can still be applied to all manner of situations in life, and which is of itself a proof of the inexhaustible vitality of the christian faith.

Let us see, first of all, what is the principle involved in it, and then how we can apply it to the present state of the world, and ourselves, and especially to the occasion on which I have to ask your contributions.

The principle involved in the text is this, that "prevention is better than cure;" that sympathy is a surer way of conquest than repulsion; that a man must be accounted your friend till he makes himself your enemy; that the extreme rigour of justice is the extreme excess of injustice; that evil is best overcome by good; that love wins back what hate repels; that whatever there is of good must be encouraged by all means, and at all hazards, and in all ways. This is the whole principle of the divine redemption of mankind. Prevention, I have said, is better than cure. Prevention! Expressive word, if we take it in its full sense! God "*prevents*" us, as we say in our collects; he comes before us; he anticipates us; he welcomes the first opening of good; he sends to us what in old theology is called his prevenient, his preventing grace. The human soul turns towards the Source of all good, and it finds that God's countenance has already been

turning towards it. Man is entreated to be reconciled to God, and he finds that, long before, God has been reconciled to him. The estrangement has been on our side, not on God's side. The prodigal son determined to arise and go to his father, and already, when he is yet a long way off, his father sees him, and runs to meet him, and comes before, and prevents him. The readiness of God to receive us is indeed incalculable. From the depths of eternity, from everlasting to everlasting, his heart has yearned towards us. Prevention is, indeed, only the active form of Providence. He "*provides*," that is he foresees, and therefore he "*prevents*," that is he anticipates. We love him, but he has already first loved us. The eternal God has already been our refuge; the everlasting arms have already been holding us, though we knew it not. He takes the seed as the pledge of the harvest. He justifies us for our first humble faith in Him. He puts us, as it were, on our honour. He treats us as a wise father or teacher treats his children; he makes the best of us; he take us for what we are in the hope of what we shall be. He encourages us by not being extreme to mark what is done amiss. The grand experiment of the first original gospel of Christ was the total forgiveness of the past, the unbounded hope of what was in store for the future. The grand experiment of the first original Church of Christ was the inclusion within it of all who wished to be included, the welcome of the very simplest profession of faith in Christ, the call to everyone that thirsted to come to the waters of life, without money and without price.

In how many ways does this branch out. Look, first, at the blessed work of Christ himself here, throughout His whole manifestation, the true likeness of God, the true example of man. Look at the scene, for example, recorded in this morning's gospel. There was the rough fisherman in his fishing vessel on the lake of Gennesaret. Suddenly he finds himself in the presence of One higher and holier than anything which he had ever before conceived. What was he in his homely calling, in all his ignorance, in all his weakness, that he should be within a hundred miles of that teacher? "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." How like to many a one now who thinks he is not good enough to be religious, who thinks he has no chance of doing anything really useful to the world, that the face of Christ is too divine for him to look upon, the name of Christ too sacred for him to name. So Peter thought; so

we think for ourselves; but so thought not our great Redeemer. In that very shyness, and humility, and plainness of speech, He sees the ground work of the chief apostle. In the energy with which the nets were cast into the bright waters of the lake, he saw the energy of the fisherman of the souls and the spirits of men. "Fear not, henceforth thou shalt catch men?" Or again, see how he dealt with Thomas. Thomas, as we should now say, *doubted*, disbelieved, doubted even the great historical fact of the christian revelation, doubted his Lord's glorious resurrection; doubted it in spite of the repeated asseverations of his fellow apostles. How did his Master deal with him? He might have refused to see the faithless disciple; he might have bid Thomas renounce his doubts as the condition of reconciliation; he might have refused to enter the company of the believing twelve until they had cast out their unbelieving brother. He did no such thing. He appeared amongst them; he turned at once, not to the loving John or the ardent Peter, but to the doubting Thomas; to him he shows his hands and his side, to him he pronounces those words of great and endless comfort: from him he receives, as it were, in return, a far more complete confession of adoring love than he had received even from Peter or from John; the one returning penitent was of more value than the ninety and nine who needed no repentance; the confession of the one doubting apostle was of more value than that of the eleven believing apostles, who had never fully believed, we may almost say, because they had never doubted. Or look at the expiring thief on the cross. He had been stained with deeds of blood and violence; he dies, we may say, in the very commission of crime; he has the very faintest notions of the person, and work, and spiritual doctrines of him who hangs beside him. Shall he be cast out? Shall the survivors judge that he is certainly lost? Shall some who stand by only remember that the last thing that they heard was the blasphemous derision which issued from his lips? No. Through all that cloud of sin, and violence, and ignorance, and error, the eye of the merciful Saviour, even in that supreme moment, saw the dawn of better things. That one expiring cry, "Lord, remember me," was enough to show the hope which lay at the bottom of the soul of the tortured malefactor, and he alone in that vast multitude received the divine absolution—"This day shalt thou be with me in Paradise."

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And what our Lord did in his life on earth, his church has done since. Look at that early apostolic church, which had one heart and one soul, in the first days of the gospel. Who were its first preachers? What were their notions of Christ's religion? Think of their imperfect and erroneous thoughts concerning Christ and his blessed work—concerning Jews and Gentiles—concerning things clean and unclean—concerning the end of the world. Yet they were not cast out. They had that in them which showed that they would grow up into something far better; therefore they were sent out by their Master to teach all nations, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; therefore, they became the first founders of the catholic church. Or look at the first martyr—Stephen. Read that noble speech in which he addressed his judges: as you read it, mark the many variations from the history of the Old Testament; observe how those few verses contain no less than twelve distinct contradictions of, or additions to, the sacred Hebrew text. Shall he be cast out because of those variations? Shall he be rejected as an Alexandrian—as a Grecian—as a follower of traditions unknown to the older church? Or shall not, rather, these and all other like imperfections be regarded but as spots, in the light of that glory which shone upon his countenance, and which made his face like as the face of an angel? Shall we not feel that to his own divine Master, in these small things, as in those greater things, he standeth or falleth? Yea; and he shall be holden up, for the Lord, whom he served, and for whom he died, shall be able to make him stand, and his name remains for ever enshrined as the first of "the noble army of martyrs." And look at the services of the later church, in which the best feelings of the church in all ages are expressed. What is the main principle which runs through them all, from first to last? From the first moment that the little child is received into the church, by baptism, to the last moment when the old man, stained with the sins and infirmities of a life, is laid in his grave, it is still the same divine truth—"Him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out." That little child, unconscious as it is, forbid it not—condemn it not; in its innocency, see the hope of what it yet may be; in the good-will of its earthly parents, and of its heavenly Saviour, hope the best things for it; look forward in the confident belief that the rest of its life will be according to this good beginning; pronounce it by a charity that hopes and believes all

things holy, blessed, regenerate. Or that departed sinner (for sinners in the full age of manhood, we all must have been, offenders great or small—penitent, or it may be impenitent)—that departed sinner, gone to his grave—shall he be cast out, and buried with the burial of a dog? Shall the church in that awful moment close our lips, and forbid us to speak with any hope of the dead, or with any consolation to the survivors? We all know that there have been excellent men — there have been men of strict discipline — who shrink from any such expressions. Let us pay all respect to scruples like these, but let us not the less remember that they are but the timid fears of the natural man, and not the heaven-born aspirations of the children of our heavenly Father. When we thank God that he has delivered our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world—when we express our humble hope that the departed soul rests, or may rest, in one of the many mansions of our Father's home, are we not responding to the blessed doctrine of our just and merciful Judge, who said, "Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out?"

Such are some of the more general exemplifications of this great truth. How deeply does it concern us all in its application! How deeply—may we for a moment say—how deeply does it concern us in the controversies which have beset our own church in former times, or in present. You should call a man your friend, I have said, until he has declared himself your enemy. Oh! if we could always act, or have acted, on this principle! Oh! if, when John Wesley arose to reanimate and revivify our church, the main body of our clergy could have dealt with him in the same noble, generous, confiding spirit in which, to their immortal honour be it said, he was dealt with by so many of the illustrious bishops of that time! If that heroic soul could have been bound to us by those endearing cords of common interest and affection which he himself was so eager to acknowledge, and which he himself never cast off! Oh! if in each successive disturbance of our ecclesiastical state, our first thought could be, not "How shall we get rid of this troubler of Israel?" but "How shall we keep him who clings to the service of truth or of goodness?"—if our prevailing cry could always be, not "Him that cometh to us with vexatious questions, we will in any wise cast out," but "Him that cometh to us with a sincere love of truth, even though with many errors and defects, we will in no wise cast

out; we will by all means keep in!" We often take it for granted, that those who thus disturb us are not worth keeping. It is surely more true to say, in every such case, from whatever quarter, in all ages of the church, those who thus disturb us, are the best worth keeping—the best worth making our friends—the best worth struggling against our inclinations to keep. They are worth it, because, if kept, they become the best and most efficient friends; because, if cast out, they become the most dangerous enemies; because, by driving them out, we drive out the salt, without which we ourselves lose our savour. "Receive such," as the apostle says, "not to doubtful disputations, but in the unity of the Spirit, and in the bonds of peace." Receive their questionings as the counsels of a friend, not as the attacks of an enemy; receive their facts, unwelcome as they may be, as the facts from which the whole counsel of God may be more fully known and preached amongst us; receive the recognition of any single gospel-truth—of any single aspect of our Saviour's divine life—of any single aspect of apostolic doctrine, as so much clear gain—as a homage the more welcome, because it may even be reluctantly offered to the whole truth and grandeur of the Christian scheme, which we, as we may think, hold pure and undiluted throughout. Condemn them not, unless by study and conviction we are absolutely compelled to condemn them. Prevent, go before, anticipate their objections by your good-will, courtesy, impartiality, charity, and sympathy.

And how exactly does all this apply, word for word, to the Institution for which I have to ask your aid. I have spoken of the divine prevention of our short-comings, in the work of redemption; I have glanced at the examples of this in the actual life of our blessed Redeemer; I have shown how wisely it has been made the rule of the best services of our church, and how much it is needed in all our troubles and controversies. Every one of these reflections find an application in a homely and undeniable shape, in this good institution. The children of parents dead, or unknown, or vicious; the children themselves often of wandering habits, hanging on the verge of crime, if not actually involved in it; children who have no great names, and no great interests to plead in their behalf—these are the very types of that character and condition which the hardness, and coldness, and narrowness of our ordinary human nature would cast out and neglect. "They belong," as we say, "to the dangerous classes;

the less we have to do with them, the better." So we reason in many other spheres; so, perhaps, we should in this sphere, but that—at least, in these spheres of practical work—the voice of Christ makes itself heard above all the jars of human discord: "Suffer them to come unto me, and forbid them not: them that come to me, by an approach however distant, with hopes however faint, with indications of good however slight, I will in no wise cast out." He will not cast them out, and we will not cast them out: those little creatures—homeless, brotherless, fatherless, purposeless—give them a home, where they shall be looked after; give them a family, where they shall be cared for; give them a work, which shall employ their idle hands; wash them—clean them from the filth of the body, and from the filth of the soul; track them through the useful services in which they will afterwards be placed. It may not be a work of comprehension such as excites our highest aspirations, but it is a work of comprehension and sympathy of which the good can be disputed by none, and of which the very fact of its undisputed good, is an encouragement to all like good elsewhere. But at any rate we may indulge ourselves in the certainty of those gospel truths which I laid down at the beginning of this discourse. Prevention here, whatever it may be elsewhere, is better than cure; sympathy here, whatever it may be elsewhere, is better than repulsion. Evil here is unmistakeably overcome by good. Reckon these children, at least to be your friends unless they insist on being your enemies. Those who come to you even from the darkest haunts of sin, even from the most amazing ignorance, even in the filthiest garb, even from the worst antecedents, yet, because they do not run away from you, because the mere fact of their coming shows desire for improvement, do not cast them out; but by your encouragement, by your contributions, enlarge this Home, and encourage those who have set it on foot. Receive them; include them; restore them; lift them up; for this is the will of Him who hateth nothing that he hath made, who forgives the sins of all those who are penitent, and creates and makes new hearts in those who truly return to him. This was the first Home of the kind; make the most of it; make the best of it; you cannot do anything but good by supporting it.